

Israel, Syria announce nuclear energy ambitions

PARIS: Mideast rivals Israel and Syria on Tuesday each announced ambitions to develop nuclear energy, with Israel facing the prospect that its plan could bring new international attention to its secretive nuclear activities.

Both countries laid out their hopes at an international conference on civilian nuclear energy at the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. Civilian nuclear energy contributes far less to global warming than burning of fossil fuels but worries many because of the risks of long-term waste storage and the possibility of proliferation.

"We need this energy source because it is environmentally clean," Israeli Infrastructure Minister Uzi Landau told The Associated Press in Paris. He called Israel's need for nuclear energy "imminent" but gave no timeline for an atomic power plant.

In an interview on the sidelines of the conference, Landau said his country would open up any nuclear plants to international inspections - but said he saw no reason for his country to allow inspectors into what are believed to be nuclear weapons sites, or to sign the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

Landau's announcement Tuesday could complicate U.S.-led efforts to impose a new round of sanctions against Iran for its refusal to cooperate with international nuclear inspectors. Tehran says its uranium enrichment activities are peaceful but several world powers suspect it is seeking weapons.

Iran and North Korea, whose nuclear program has also drawn international scorn, were not invited to the conference.

Landau stood firm against Iran's nuclear plans. Israel has never openly acknowledged



Israeli Infrastructure Minister Uzi Landau speaks to media during an international conference on civilian nuclear energy, in Paris, March 9. (AP)

being a nuclear power, following a policy it calls "nuclear ambiguity."

"When it comes to Iran, you have a country that openly speaks about the destruction of a United Nations member state (Israel)," Landau told The AP. "Why does a poor country in the Middle East have to put so much economic resources (into nuclear activities) instead of feeding its own people, unless they have other ambitions, purposes on their minds?"

Minutes after Landau spoke at the conference, another of Israel's rivals, Syria, expressed nuclear interest.

Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faysal Mekdad said his country "calls for the need to consider alternative energy sources, including nuclear energy" to meet its growing demands.

"The peaceful application of nuclear energy should not be monopolized by the few that own this technology but should be available equally for all," Mekdad said, noting Syria's

growing population.

Mekdad did not elaborate on specific nuclear plans.

The Israeli minister, asked about Syria's proposal, said any nuclear-energized country needs to have "responsible leadership that is also following all the measures and all the precautions ... to ensure that all the power plants that are built are used for peaceful means."

Landau met several months ago with the French Energy Minister Jean-Louis Borloo, and raised the idea of French-Israeli-Jordanian cooperation in developing a nuclear power plant.

Borloo was enthusiastic about that idea, Landau said. France derives more of its electricity from nuclear power than any other country and has a highly developed civilian nuclear industry - and Paris sees export potential. -AP

Iran hopes China won't bow to sanctions pressure

Flying under the radar to skirt ban

A Jan. 24, 2009, purchase order shows the Chinese company Roc-Master Manufacture & Supply Co., ordered nuclear-related equipment from Taiwan-based Heli-Ocean Technology Co. Ltd., an agent of Swiss company Inficon Holding AG. The destination on the order was later changed from Shanghai, China, to Tehran, Iran.



Map shows destinations for nuclear related equipment transaction. (AFP)

TEHRAN: Iran said on Tuesday it hoped China would not give in to pressure to agree to new sanctions that the United States and its allies hope to win UN approval for over its nuclear program.

"China is a great country which enjoys enough power to pursue its own decisions independently without being pressured by America," foreign minister spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast said at a news conference in Tehran. "Of course our expectations from such a big country is the same ... to pursue its foreign policies independently and just observe its own national interests," he said, citing Iran's close relations with China.

China's Foreign Minister said on Sunday new sanctions on Iran would not solve the stand-off over its nuclear program, which Western powers fear will allow

Tehran to develop a nuclear weapon. Iran says it is only interested in electricity.

Washington and other Western powers want China to approve a proposed UN resolution imposing new sanctions on Iran, a big source of oil for China.

Beijing has previously resisted calls for harsh sanctions and Yang emphasized his government's reluctance, while stopping short of opposing outright any new UN resolution.

A draft Western document proposes restricting more Iranian banks abroad, but does not call for sanctions against Iran's oil and gas industries.

China is one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, each holding the power to veto resolutions. -Reuters

Lebanon's rival groups resume national dialogue



Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, (right), shakes hands with Christian leader Michel Aoun during talks at the Presidential Palace in Baabda, east of Beirut, Lebanon, March 9. (AP)

BEIRUT: Lebanon's rival political groups have resumed national reconciliation talks and Hezbollah's weapons are a main topic on the agenda.

Leaders of more than a dozen factions are meeting at the presidential palace for Tuesday's talks headed by President Michel Suleiman. The dialogue is part of a peace deal reached in Qatar in May 2008 that ended sectarian clashes and defused a crisis.

The factions have conducted similar dialogues every few months since. The last session was held before parliament elections in June.

But they have so far made no progress on a defense strategy that would eventually integrate Hezbollah's weapons into the Lebanese regular armed forces.

The sides remain deeply at odds over the fate of the Islamic militant group's arsenal. -AP

Fourth Australia passport linked to Hamas killing

SYDNEY: Foreign Minister Stephen Smith Tuesday said a fourth Australian passport-holder had been drawn into the murder of a Hamas leader in Dubai, after Interpol issued an alert for a suspect using the man's name.

A team of Australian Federal Police and Australian Passport Office officials are already in Israel to investigate the use of three fake Australian passports in the January death of Mahmud Al-Mabhuh.

Smith said that a fourth Australian passport, in the name of Joshua Krycer, had also been linked to the alleged assassination. "Inquiries by the Australian Federal Police and the Australian Passport Office indicate the further passport presented in Dubai was fraudulently duplicated, as was the case with the initial three passports," Smith said.

"There is no information to suggest that Krycer, as with any of the other three Australian passport holders, was involved in any way, other than as victims of identity fraud," he said in a statement.

Mabhuh, a founder of the military wing of the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas, was found dead in his Dubai hotel room on January 20. Police say he had been drugged then suffocated.

Australian reports said Krycer is a speech pathologist who works at a hospital in Jerusalem. -AFP

Iraqi parties both claim lead in parliamentary election

BAGHDAD: The Iraqi prime minister's coalition and its main secular rival both claimed to be ahead in the vote count Monday, a day after historic parliamentary elections that the top US commander said would let all but 50,000 American troops come home by the end of summer.

Sunday's election, which took place against a backdrop of violence in Baghdad, marked a turning point for the country's nascent democracy. The winner will help determine whether Iraq can resolve its sectarian divisions and preserve the nation's fragile security as US troops leave.

Initial results for some provinces, as well as for Baghdad - an area essential to determining any winner - were to be announced Tuesday.

The election was only the country's second for a full parliamentary term, and it attracted 62 percent of about 19 million eligible voters, according to the nation's election commission. The last such election, in December 2005, attracted roughly 76 percent of eligible voters.

Officials attributed the lower turnout to a combination of voter intimidation, more stringent ID requirements at the polls and a drop in voter excitement. A spate of attacks on election day - some directly targeting voters and polling stations - killed 36 people.

Gen. Ray Odierno, the top US commander in Iraq, called the election a milestone and said that every sign suggests Iraq will be able to peacefully form a new government in the coming months, and US combat troops can head home by the end of August.

Most of the roughly 96,000 troops in Iraq will remain here through May, when the military will begin scaling down to 50,000 noncombat troops by the Obama administration's self-imposed deadline at the start of September, Odierno said.

The timetable calls for all troops to be out by the end of 2011. "Unless there's a catastrophic event, we don't see that changing," Odierno said.

With ballots still being counted, officials from both the State of Law coalition led by Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki and the rival Iraqiya claimed to be leading. Iraqiya is a secular alliance led by Shiite former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, but it also contains many Sunnis.

Abbas Al-Bayati from Al-Maliki's coalition said early information from the coalition's representatives showed the group did well in Baghdad and in the Shiite south, which includes Iraq's second-largest city, Basra.

"We think that the State of Law coalition will shoulder the task of forming the



Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki, who leads the (State of Law coalition). (AP)



Secular alliance leader Ayad Allawi (AP)

next government," he said.

But Iraqiya conceded no ground, saying the group had done well in areas such as Anbar, Diyala and Ninewa, which is home to Iraq's third-largest city. Iraqiya appeared to cash in on the votes of Sunnis who see Allawi as a Shiite who can represent their interests but is not beholden to neighboring Iran.

"We expect that we are first in Iraq," said Raheem Al-Shimmari, an Iraqiya official.

An official from a competing Shiite party opposing Al-Maliki said the State of Law coalition appeared to be in the lead. The official spoke on the condition that he not be named because of the sensitivity of the issue. -AP

Dubai accuses Israel of 'vast falsification' of passports

DUBAI: Dubai's police chief on Tuesday accused Israel of "vast falsification" of travel documents, noting that dozens of false passports were uncovered following a Hamas leader's murder in the emirate. "I ring alarm bells. Israel is falsifying Western passports on a large scale. We discover forged passports on a daily basis," Dahi Khalfan told AFP.

"The world must stop an operation of vast falsification of official documents (that) a formal body (Israel's spy agency Mossad) is carrying out," he added.

Mahmud Al-Mabhuh, a founder of the Palestinian Islamist Hamas organization's military wing, was found dead in a room of the Al-Bustan Rotana hotel near

Dubai's airport on January 20.

Dubai police have accused the Mossad of being behind the murder.

International police agency Interpol issued arrest notices Monday for 16 suspects wanted by Dubai in connection with the killing. It had previously issued notices for 11 suspects.

Alongside the new alerts, Interpol also announced that it had joined a Dubai-based international police task force investigating the killing.

Dubai police have identified 26 out of 27 suspects from the hit squad murder they say bore the hallmarks of the Mossad. The Hamas man had been drugged and then suffocated.

Dubai police say the suspects entered Dubai on fake passports using the identities of 12 people from Britain, six from Ireland, four from France, three Australians and a German, before fleeing the Gulf emirate. Two members of the hit squad had "returned to the United States after passing through a European country," said Khalfan last week.

Israeli officials have refused to confirm or deny the reports.

But Israel's media sees the killing as Mossad's work, and the probe has caused a diplomatic headache for the Jewish state with the countries whose passports were used summoning its envoys to hear angry protests. -AFP

Jordan's King Abdullah to visit Russia

MOSCOW: Jordan's King Abdullah II is to travel to Moscow on March 10 and 11 for a working visit, the Kremlin announced on Tuesday.

Abdullah, who has visited Russia nine times over the last seven years, is to hold talks with Russian President Dmitry

Medvedev on Thursday, the Kremlin website said.

Russian foreign ministry spokesman Andrei Nesterenko said recently that "new cooperation possibilities (between Russia and Jordan) have emerged, including in the realm of nuclear energy." -AFP